



• A Ghanaian girl being treated of guinea worm. On the right is Jimmy Carter.

than 99.8 per cent, from approximately 3.5 million people to 4,619. The result is that, 14 of the original 20 endemic countries have eliminated the disease. Cases of the ancient parasitic disease reached an all-time low in 2008 with 4,619 cases reported worldwide, compared to the previous year when cases numbered 9,585. According to available statistics, Ghana made remarkable progress in 2008, bringing incidence of the disease down to 501, from 3,358 in 2007. The Centre has also made appreciable impact in the eradication of the disease in five other African countries—Sudan, Mali, Ethiopia, Niger and Nigeria.

The good news that came out of the Carter Centre review of its health-assisted programmes in Nigeria recently however is that the world is indeed free of the pandemic. Emmanuel Miri, a medical doctor and country representative of the centre, told this magazine that in its 21 years of involvement in Nigeria, it has for the first time, in 2009, received zero report about any cases of the water-borne disease in any part of the country. Based on this report, Nigeria, he maintained, will be certified as a guineaworm-free nation by the World Health Organisation, WHO, provided the zero-incidence continues between now and 2011.

Giving insight to how this dreaded monster was killed in Nigeria, Miri said the TCC at inception in 1988, discovered that Nigeria had the highest number of people suffering from the scourge in the world. "There were 653,620 cases of Guinea worm, found in 5,879 villages in 21 states and the Federal Capital Territory in Nigeria." Miri stated that the figure of those suffering from the disease came down to 16,374 cases in seven years, representing about 97 per cent. This drastic reduction, according to Miri, was made possible by the entrance of the former military Head of State of Nigeria, Gen. Yakubu Gowon, as the major public relations person in the fight for the eradication of the disease. Coupled with the active involvement of the federal, state and local governments, the incidence of the disease was further reduced to 7,869 cases in 2006 and 16 cases in early 2009, bringing the reduction total to 99.8 per

A Killer Blow To Guinea Worm

The drive to eradicate Guinea worm disease is one of the world's most impressive global health success stories

TONY ORILADE/ABUJA

At last, Nigeria is on its way to being free from the deadly and economically debilitating Guinea worm infection. This was the good news that came out of the recent three-day stock-taking stakeholders meeting in Abuja organised by the Carter Centre. The Centre and its partners have been involved in efforts to eradicate Guinea worm disease across the globe.

Founded in 1982 by former U.S. President, Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalyn, the non-government organisation began its activities to help eradicate Guinea worm disease in 1986. The campaign has led to the drastic reduction of the scourge by more

cent.

In his remarks, Gowon who chaired the occasion at which this cheery news was made public, commended the great contributions the Centre had made, and continues to make, in all its health-assisted programmes in Nigeria. Among these programmes are the control of River Blindness, Lymphatic Filariasis, Trachoma, Schistosomiasis, Malaria and the distribution of Vitamin A supplement. "It is not possible to adequately quantify the aggregate contributions of the Carter Centre in Nigeria through these programmes. Though more than 650,000 guineaworm cases were discovered across the country in 1987, available records have shown that there is zero case of the spread of the disease in Nigeria today. But it suffices for me to state emphatically and with-



• **Miri:** Guinea worm dead in Nigeria.

out any equivocation that the man 'at the end of the road' living in the Nigeria hinterland, far from the comforts of development, has been the greatest beneficiary of this good job by the Carter Centre. I know they say it, but on their behalf, I say thank you to President Jimmy and Mrs. Rosalyn Carter and their entire team for this uncommon show of humanity and compassion," Gowon said in an emotion-laden voice.

Continuing, he

stated that "we have started our march to Nigeria's certification as free from guineaworm. With the first year of zero-case throughout the country this year, we are staring at history in the face as the public health [institutions] in Nigeria have now succeeded in defeating guineaworm after over two decades of battle against it. We now have two more years of zero-case reporting before WHO certifies the country free of guineaworm disease."

He continued, "Two years ago at this same forum, I pledged that I and the Yakubu Gowon Centre will not relent in our intensive advocacy, mobilisation and health education in order to rid the nation of this scourge of guineaworm. Everybody's contribution is crucial to the attainment of our collective objective and goal, not in Guinea worm, but in all other disease conditions to which the Centre has pledged its unwavering commitment. Vigilance must be the watchword for us now, not only for Guinea worm, but for all other diseases. We simply cannot afford to slacken our vigilance that all is well. We must not allow a relapse!"

In the light of this, Gowon said he and his Centre embarked on a series of "thank you" tours of all the endemic states, and communities in Sokoto, Kebbi, Zamfara and Katsina, in the North-West and Ogun and Oyo in the South-West. Other states and zones will follow. "The purpose of these visits is to thank the state government, the local government and people of those states for their cooperation, and for fulfilling their pledge to support the Guinea worm eradication programme, for abiding with all the health education messages that finally brought about the needed change in behaviour."

Hovering on the brink of global eradication, Guinea worm will be the first disease to be abolished without a vaccine or medicine. A disease that results in victims enduring the emergence of a two- to three-foot worm from a sore, Guinea worm is spread only when humans drink contaminated water, and it can be controlled through simple, low-technology measures, such as filtering all drinking water and educating people who are infected to take precautions to prevent transmission.

Despite the cheery news, the Vice-President of the Carter Centre on health, Mr. Don Hopkins said that the battle is not completely over. "We cannot afford to slacken or be complacent on the battle on Guinea worm disease eradication, and take the certification for granted. We have to complete the next two years 2010 and 2011 free of guineaworm to qualify; therefore, all hands must be on deck. Every one of us and our part-



• **Dr. Donald Hopkins,** Vice President Health Programme.

ners must diligently play their assigned roles," he said.

To help eliminate the remaining cases, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the United Kingdom Department for International Development, DFID, announced recently new commitments, totaling US\$55 million to support the historic Carter Centre-led eradication campaign.

Since 2000, the Gates Foundation has been a valued partner in the Centre's Guinea Worm Eradication Programme, inspiring an outpouring of contributions from the donor community during this landmark effort. DFID generously pledged £10 million—approximately US\$15 million—to support the campaign, and its support will be matched by the Gates Foundation. Both the Gates Foundation and DFID grants are being shared between the Centre and the World Health Organisation, WHO.

"We have made substantial progress; many countries that previously had Guinea worm are now free of the disease. We must now push to eliminate it completely," said Douglas Alexander, the United Kingdom's international development secretary.

"At this stage of the campaign, we need to redouble case containment efforts and enforce strict surveillance activities to ensure Guinea worm disease eradication," said Dr. Margaret Chan, Director-General of the WHO, adding: "The task is daunting and financially challenging, but achievable. To do this in the shortest time possible, we need more than ever, the exemplary support and commitment of existing and future partners to rid the world of one of its oldest scourges."

In Atlanta on 5 December 2008, Jimmy Carter stated that anything is possible when people come together to champion a cause. "Guinea worm is poised to be the second disease eradicated from Earth, ending needless suffering for millions of people from one of the world's oldest and most horrific afflictions. The reduction of Guinea worm cases by more than 99 per cent proves that when people work together, great positive change is possible," he said.



• **Prof. Osotimehin,** Health Minister.